



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Alexandria's role in the labor movement

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*Image: Union leader John Lewis, Library of Congress*

As our country celebrates its 125th Labor Day this weekend, the role of Alexandria in the labor movement probably deserves a brief examination.

The most obvious contribution is that of United Mine Workers of America president John Lewis, who lived at 614 Oronoco St. from 1937 until his death in 1969. This home is now known as the Lee-Fendall House Museum. Lewis moved here after the UMWA moved its headquarters from Indianapolis to Washington, hoping to gain more influence with the administration of President Franklin Roosevelt.

Lewis' time in Alexandria both raised the visibility of the unions under his leadership and made them a lightning rod for critics of organized labor. Labor unions had a notoriously difficult time attracting membership in the South. At the height of labor union membership nationwide, in the 1930s, Virginia labor unions peaked at approximately 15 percent.

Lewis's role in leading the eight unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations away from the American Federation of Labor in 1935 included a vow to accept workers regardless of gender or race. Virginia workers who were already reluctant to join unions did not rush to join CIO unions that challenged traditional separations of race and gender.

But it was Lewis' call for national coal strikes that brought protesters to his house at the corner of Oronoco and North Washington streets. In 1942, he led the UMWA out of the CIO that he had led away from the AFL. He led two coal miner strikes, the first in 1943 during World War II, and the second in 1946. The first drew protests to 614 Oronoco, despite the awful working conditions that Lewis fought against.

Among the many epithets the protesters labeled Lewis with, "Hitler's Helper" was probably the most unwelcome.

The second strike helped bring about the Taft-Hartley Act, which severely restricted the power and activity of labor unions, especially when the industry affected is deemed a national security issue, as was coal at the time.

Despite these setbacks, Lewis continued to lead the UMWA's assertion of worker's rights until his retirement in 1960. Some of his biggest accomplishments came after the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act. In 1948, the UMWA won concessions from the coal mine owners, establishing medical and pension benefits for its members, at the cost of agreeing to allow the closing of unprofitable mines and the introduction of automation into the mining process.





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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Lewis' union also won periodic wage and benefit increases in the deal. In 1952, Lewis won not only periodic wage and benefit raises for his members, but greatly raised the safety standards in coal mines when Congress passed the Federal Coal Mine Safety Act.

Despite the antagonistic climate that surrounded Lewis when he lived in Alexandria, he achieved some of his biggest accomplishments while living at 614 Oronoco. The Lee-Fendall House Museum is currently displaying an exhibit on its former owner who played such a major role in the labor movement of the 20th century

*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*